



Joseph Nechvatal (American artist and philosopher)

S.K.G. Noise/Admiration March 2012 Interview with Joseph Nechvatal

I am proud to present an interview with the american artist and philosopher **Joseph Nechvatal**. After several other books he has recently published a book entitled *Immersion into Noise* (University of Minnesota Press 2011), which is one of the deepest books about this highly overlooked topic. On April 12 he has also opened a solo exhibition at Galerie Richard in New York. He will present a new surround sound version of his noise music *viral symphOny* at Harvestworks in New York. If you live nearby please take your time and your chances to visit this highly rewarding presentation of his most recent works. Dr. Nechvatal was so kind to answer my questions via e-mail in March 2012 and to provide me with some reproductions of his most recent works and a photograph of himself. All answers are written and copyright by *Joseph Nechvatal*. The questions are all mine.

This is the interview:

SKG: *Dear Dr. Nechvatal, you are an artist and a philosopher, how would you like to introduce yourself to audience ?*

Joseph Nechvatal: Since 1986 I have worked with ubiquitous electronic visual information, computers and computer-robotics. My computer-robotic assisted paintings and computer software animations are shown regularly in galleries and museums throughout the world. From 1991-1993 I worked as artist-in-resident at the Louis Pasteur Atelier and the Saline Royale / Ledoux Foundation's computer lab in Arbois, France on *The Computer Virus Project*: an experiment with computer viruses as a creative stratagem. In 2002 I extended that artistic research into the field of viral artificial life through my collaboration with the programmer Stéphane Sikora.

I earned my Ph.D. in the philosophy of art and new technology at The Centre for Advanced Inquiry in the Interactive Arts (CAiiA) University of Wales College, Newport, UK where I served as conference coordinator for the 1st International CAiiA Research Conference entitled *Consciousness Reframed: Art and Consciousness in the Post-Biological Era* (July 1997); an international conference which looked at new developments in art, science, technology and consciousness.

I presently teach at the School of Visual Arts in New York City (SVA). My book of essays *Towards an Immersive Intelligence: Essays on the Work of Art in the Age of Computer Technology and Virtual Reality (1993-2006)* was published by Edgewise Press in 2009. In 2011 my book *Immersion Into Noise* was published by the University of Michigan Library's Scholarly Publishing Office in conjunction with the Open Humanities Press.

SKG: *You have worked in several fields of artistic production, what do you see as your main field ?*

Joseph Nechvatal: Painting.

SKG: *When was your first contact with Noise ?*

Joseph Nechvatal: My childhood was set in a rather peaceful suburban setting. The distant sound of the train is the only noise I can recall, other than occasional thunder and other sounds of nature. My first cultural aspect of noise occurred at age 17 when I attended *The Jimi Hendrix Experience* concert December 1, 1968 at the Chicago Colliseum and sat in the very last row—far far away from the stage. Hendrix appeared miniscule. However the speakers were located just behind my head and his grandiloquent feedback was ear-splitting; an intensely pleasant, if disjunctive noise experience.

SKG: *I have read on Wikipedia, that you have worked with LaMonte Young, what have you learned from him ?*

Joseph Nechvatal: To look for non-popular times and forms of composition.

SKG: *In April 2012 you will show your newest artworks in the Gallery Richard in New York, can you tell the readers of my blog, what the main focus of this exhibition is ?*

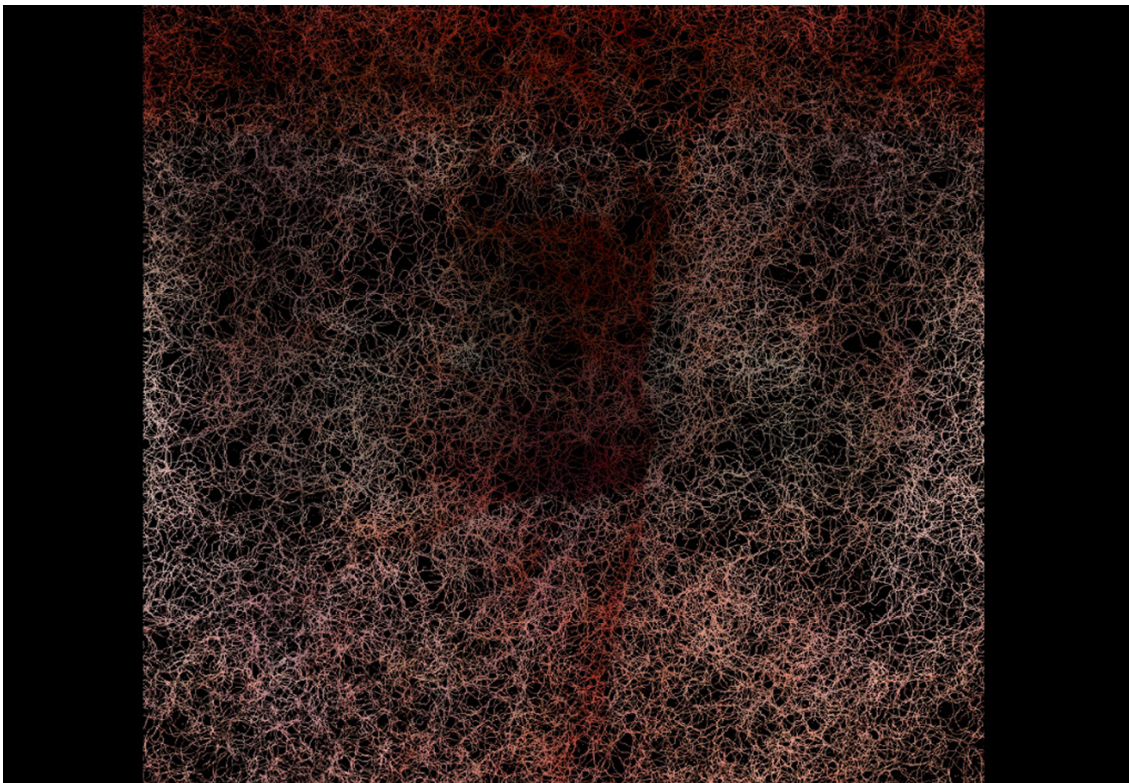
Joseph Nechvatal: I will present in a solo show at Galerie Richard a series of new paintings entitled *nOise anusmOs* - some accompanied by a digital video. The *nOise anusmOs* exhibition will take place from April 12th till May 26th, 2012.

Following the opening on April 12th from 6 to 8 pm, I will present the world premier concert of the immersive surround-sound re-mastered version of my *viral symphony* at 9:30 at Harvestworks (596 Broadway, #602 New York, NY 10012). *nOise anusmOs* and *viral symphony* are being presented in association with the recent publication of my new book *Immersion Into Noise*.

The theme of *nOise anusmOs* is a linkage of the human retina and anus to the cosmos.

nOise anusmOs suggests that this includes the connectivity of the noise universe with the inner humman in a spirit of imaginative artistic audacity and erotic spirituality. In *nOise anusmOs* the viewer can imaginatively re-place him or herself within a Dionysian flux of cosmological nature.

Other influences on this show are American transcendental black metal and avant-garde saxophone music.



Joseph Nechvatal, *autOmata saturnalia*, 66x44“ acrylic on canvas 2011

SKG: *In your groundbreaking and infinitely rich book Immersion into Noise you have tried to give a new formalization of the highly overlooked phenomenon of noise. What is the main thesis and the philosophical alignment of this book ?*

Joseph Nechvatal: On a planet that is increasingly technologically linked and

globally mediated, how might noises break and re-connect in distinctive and productive ways within practices located in the world of art and thought ? This is the question I have set out to explore in *Immersion Into Noise*.

For many people, if anything is representative of the art of noise, it is ambivalence. Ostensibly, everything is permitted in art today - and thus nothing is necessary. As a result, art and entertainment are said to have merged. For me, however, perhaps surprisingly, the denial of this merger and the answer to the question posed above is to be found within the challenge of style.

In writing this book I have come, counter-intuitively, to see the style of cultural noise as the necessary art of today - precisely because it does not cave in to the supposed need for immediately legible, spectacle. Indeed it restores art's responsibility of resistance.

SKG: *When I saw your book for the first time I was immediately intrigued by your artwork on the cover, can you explain a little why you have chosen it for the cover of your book ?*

Joseph Nechvatal: The painting, *sOuth pOle*, seems to be calling out and sucking in at the same time.

SKG: *In your book you have introduced several new concepts for a deeper understanding of noise (i.e. hyper-noise, beatific noise, visual noise, immersive noise consciousness to name only a few) what do you see as your main inventions and interventions in the field of noise-theory? What is the carte (in the rhizomatic sense of Mille Plateaux) you liked to construct creating your concepts ?*

Joseph Nechvatal: Some claim that art, as entertaining-spectacle, participates in the dumbing-down values that have proved useful to big business, values that address all communications to the lowest common denominator. I tend to agree. Therefore my feeling is that today art must indict—or at the very least play the role of the noisy jester who unmasks the quietly persistent lies of the powerful. Corporate and government propaganda is often designed to deceive and victimize us—and if art cannot rebuff and contest this by fueling the political will and imagination of resistance, I wonder why we

need it at all.

So for me, an intricate art of noisy resistance is increasingly valuable to an analytical social movement based on skepticism as it strengthens unique personal powers of imagination and critical thinking through self-perception, while undermining market predictabilities. Such art noise counters the effects of our age of simplification— effects that have resulted from the glut of consumer-oriented entertainment messages and political propaganda, which the mass media feed us daily in the interests of corporate profit and governmental manipulations. This look at self-perception is the impetus behind this book.

SKG: *In the introduction you write that your book tries to restore (...) art's responsibility of resistance(9) - what is your definition of resistance ? And could an original and ante-dialectical affirmation in the deepest possible sense (cf. Nietzsche, Derrida, Deleuze, Heidegger) be in the end more resistant than the negation of negation you speak of in the first chapter of your book ?*

Joseph Nechvatal: My focus is on signal-to-noise art relations, those relations that signal anti-social interruption, resistance, damage and frustration as sources of psychic pleasure. This concentration directs us towards an understanding of art noise as an art that distorts and disturbs crisp signals of cultural communications.

SKG: *For me it seems that noise-art is the only art in which the form/content relation seems to be radically subverted or melted away, what do you think about this ?*

Joseph Nechvatal: I don't know. But yes glitch awareness/appreciation potentially removes us out of our quiet and glib indolence and points us in the potent direction of expanding thunderous intensity. I believe that a post-Pop noise art is critical to us now because its glitch counter-mannerist excess can problematize the popular simulacra and make livelier the underground privateness of the human condition while remaining immersed inside the social network that engulfs and (supposedly) controls us. This glitch consideration offers us a personal critical distance (by skip, by stutter, by gap), and thus

another perspective on (and from) the given social simulacra.

SKG: *Noise seems to be present in anything, which is capable to open a space of an-archic and nomadic singularities, what could the political implication of NOISE-ART / ART-NOISE be?*

Joseph Nechvatal: The idea is to shift the political-social vortex away from outdated symbolic allegiances and towards sensate dynamic forces of change.

SKG: *In your book you have conceived noise art as a vacuole of noncommunication (15) using a term coined by Gilles Deleuze what does that mean ?*

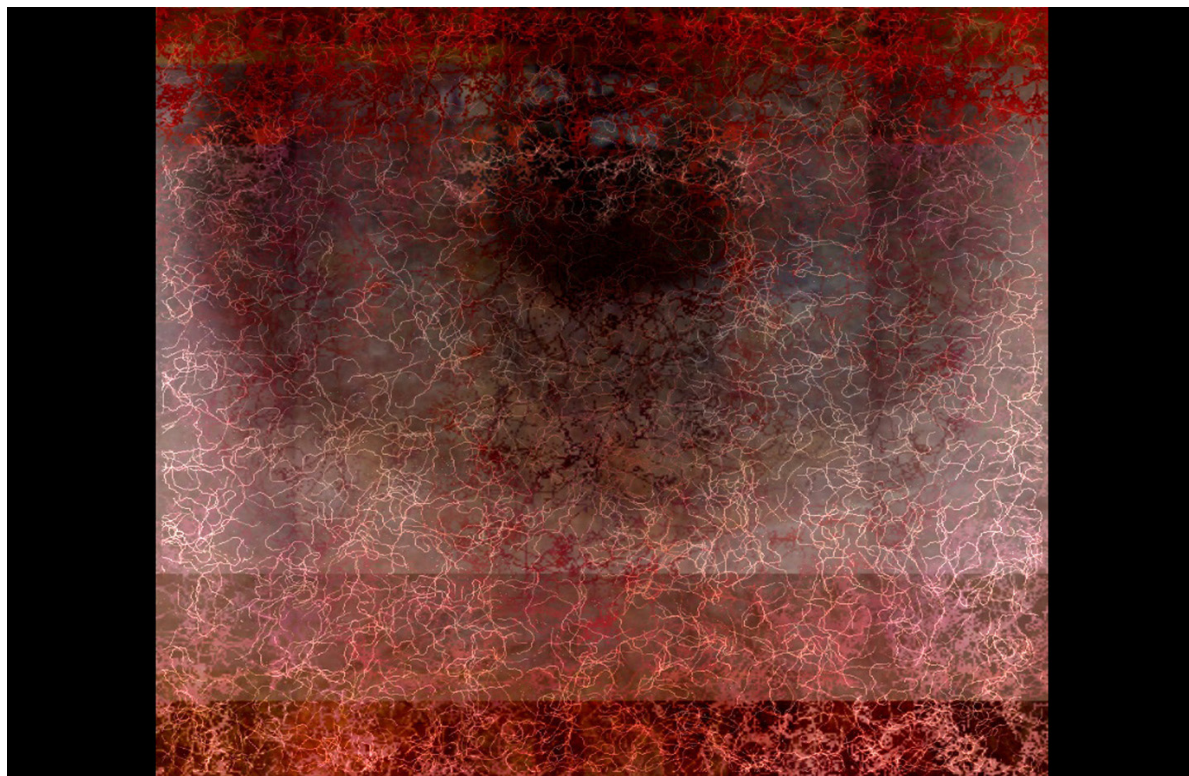
Joseph Nechvatal: My art of noise is postulated as a realm of antisocial cultural purpose directed toward the revolutionary transformation of an irrational social reality that insists on calling itself rational. I argue this with the support of Gilles Deleuze's notion of the *vacuole*. This concept of noncommunication comes from Deleuze's text *Postscript on Control Societies*. Deleuze's notion of control-information-communication-technology was influenced by the work of William S. Burroughs.

A vacuole is like a sac in a cell's membrane, completely bound up inside the cell but also separate from it. Vacuoles play a significant role in autophagy, maintaining an *imbalance* between biogenesis (production) and *degradation* (or turnover) of many substances and cell structures. They also aid in the destruction of invading bacteria or of misfolded proteins that have begun to build up within the cell. The vacuole is a major part of the plant and animal cell.

SKG: *In several chapters of Mille Plateaux Deleuze and Guattari have created and used the concept of the War machine/ machine de guerre, but – if I am correct – you never use this concept in your book. Do you think that this concept cannot be used for a theoretical formalization of subversive noise/art ?*

Joseph Nechvatal: Deleuze and Guattari have produced so many conceptual tools.

I'm sure that this one could also be used to theorize the art of noise, but it did not appeal to me because war does not appeal no me.



Joseph Nechvatal, *autOmata retinal*, 66x44“ acrylic on canvas 2011

SKG: *In Mille Plateaux Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari have also tried to formalize their idea of micro-perceptions, abstract machines and a rhizomatic unconscious, to you feel close to these ideas, when you designed your idea of an immersive noise consciousness ?*

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes I certainly do. The philosophic rhizomatic theory of Deleuze and Guattari, at a general level, supported my connectivist approach towards theorizing the noise experience, as rhizomatic theory encourages philosophic non-linear and non-restrictive interdisciplinary thinking and hence reinterpretation, which in this case proceeded from the point of view (not a point of fact anymore, but an orb) of *immersion into noise*. Noise music often delivers a rhizomatic Dionysian jittery quality

packed with levels of complexity, if not indulgent Dionysian chaos. Noise art is properly concerned with ideals of self-transcendence.

SKG: *When I read your tentative to formalize an immersive consciousness in your book, I asked myself, whether it is possible for a consciousness to be really immersive. Shouldn't the idea/concept of consciousness be substituted with another concept like Da-sein, Original Self in the Zen-Buddhist sense, or Abstract Machine? Could there really be a fundamentally anarchic and passive consciousness or is not consciousness in itself a noise-filter ?*

Joseph Nechvatal: I have come to hold that our consciousness is what we know so we are fully immersed in it even as it is a partial noise filter. By *noise consciousness* I mean, our miscellaneous neurological-ontological sense of the gradient unity of sentient self in internal discord with its surrounding milieu, that mental property of atmospheric self-attentive awareness, cognisance and feeling that allows us to experience a sense of nexus with our ostensibly unified surroundings, albeit laced with vicissitudes. I have observed in myself that noise in art tends towards unconstraintment - while being based on a sense of shifting-self.

SKG: *What is your definition of perception and how can it be formalized without a foundational and self-centered subject ?*

Joseph Nechvatal: I think that hearing and seeing is not an activity divorced from consciousness.

SKG: *What does it mean for you to be a really vibrant or resonating body/mind ?*

Joseph Nechvatal: In my view one of the most important characteristics of immersion into noise is its sense of encompassing being within a field of vibratory

enshrining: an intertwined embossed shrouding that places us at odds with the closed, cliché, visual-audio signal and resituates us within vibrancy.

SKG: *Do you see a (rhizomatic) connection between Noiseperception in a trans-subjective sense and the Unconscious ? Would noise-art really be helpful in the creation of a BwO (Corps sans organes) ?*

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes, if it is an art of noise that served (and/or reflected) a surrounding process where the self is experienced as capacity rather than existential identity, and where the evaluation of self has been revised from bounded to boundless is what I am after. Such noise consciousness represents a paradigm shift which relativizes other recognitions of self-consciousness.

It is pertinent that in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari describe this shift towards boundlessness as one's becoming a body without organs (BwO) in terms of our self-shifting representational planes emerging out of our field of compositional consistency. According to them, the body without organs is an insubstantial state of connected being beyond representation which concerns pure becomings and nomadic essences. Deleuze and Guattari go on to say that the body without organs causes intensities to pass; it produces and distributes them in a spatium that is itself intensive, lacking extension.

It is not space nor is it in space; it is matter that occupies space to a given degree—to the degree corresponding to the intensities produced. According to Brian Massumi, the translator of *A Thousand Plateaus* the body without organs is an endless weaving together of singular states, each of which is an integration of one or more impulses. These impulses form the body's variouserogenous zone(s) of condensed vibratory regions, zones of intensity in suspended animation. Hence, the body without organs is the body outside any determinate state, poised for any action in its repertory; this is the body in terms of its potential, or virtuality.

SKG: *For Deleuze / Guattari the Unconscious works like a machine in a world of pure immanence;*

has Noise-Art / Art-Noise the ability to open up the minds of the most stubborn transcendentalists and to open up new lines of flight / lignes de fuite ?

Joseph Nechvatal: Yes such scenarios suggest a merging of awareness, first into a more restricted, and then an expanded, intense statement, which is the principle of entering noise art. Thus, it is possible to say that such states of manifestation are distinguished according to the degree to which potentiality is energized through restrictional noise. To apply the noise model to consciousness would suggest that a possible criterion for making qualitative distinctions is the degree to which the potential states of consciousness are unfolded and experienced as a noisy aggregate.

SKG: *When I think of two classical Zen-Koans like What is the sound of one hand clapping? or Who listens? – I asked myself whether you can relate to this, in the sense, that only a radically transformed human sensorium can be really immersed in noise ? Is not the condition of possibility of noise-perception in the widest and deepest sense of the term related to the transcending of the subject-object-model towards an immanentist and an-archic model of the self – maybe the superjet Deleuze wrote about in Le pli. Leibniz et le baroque following Whitehead ?*

Joseph Nechvatal: Even though Otto Kernberg pointed out that the splitting of the subject from the object is the crucial mechanism for the defensive organization of the ego at its most basic (pre-oedipal) level, the subject/object question pursued in my book does not appear in any stable binary positioning of easy subject/object opposites as I recognize, as Stephen Talbott points out, that the subject/object set functions more along the dialectical lines of the magnet, where the north pole exists only by virtue of the south pole (as is the contrary). Like the supposed subject/object opposites, neither pole exists in isolation.

SKG: *In your book you never mention the work of Martin Heidegger - can you relate your concept of*

an immersive consciousness to the Heideggerian idea of moods (especially in his lectures about Hölderlin) and his concept of the Da-sein (Being-the-there-of-Being) in the non-subjective sense of the Enowning-Thinking of his works after 1936 and his idea of the peal of stillness (Geläut der Stille) ?

Joseph Nechvatal: On page 61, I state that Martin Heidegger maintained that being is the most unconscious of concepts because we are thoroughly immersed in it. I do not enjoy reading Heidegger.

SKG: *How do you transfer your philosophical ideas of noise/art into your artworks ?*

Joseph Nechvatal: That is done through intuition.

SKG: *Are your artworks conceived to have an transformative impact on the innermost sensorium of the spectators ?*

Joseph Nechvatal: My art of noise extends the possibility of a transforming rupture by addressing the frissure between intellect and the sensible. The frissure that noise art offers culture is that of a different view of the sensible, one that no longer regards the sensible as only an image (signal) cast by a remote and detached intelligibility. In noise art sophistication, signal (foreground) and noise (ground) are impenetrably interlocked and inter-embedded. And this interpenetration reveals the truth of reversibility in our culture, laced, as it is, with the counter-force of incoherence.

SKG: *When you think of the shimmering minimalism of Barnett Newman or Ad Reinhardt, can you relate this to your theory of noise and your own artistic thinking ?*

Joseph Nechvatal: In the book I mention such shimmering minimalism in relationship to Robert Ryman. The pure opticality of the color white embraced by

Ryman is a prime example of subtle noise, as in his white paintings he addresses the problems arising from the tension created from the opposition between surface materiality and opticality in relationship to the edge of the painting and its relationship to the wall on which it is hung. This ambiguity of the painting's boundary in relation to the wall that contains it draws attention into an expanded subtle noise field. Ryman does this by extending the optical white shimmering-field of color/light out from the painting onto the white gallery walls which present it. Now it is really the wall that provides the painter with his ground which Ryman himself clarifies when he writes the wall plane is actually part of the painting and it extends out three or four feet.

Hence Ryman presents his paintings as part of the white cube that has come to represent modernist ideals of purity and neutrality. The whiteness of the paintings require the whiteness of the walls, as the white-painted optical field spills out over the confining edge of the painting to fill, theoretically, the entire wall and room, thus texture, surface-plane, color and wall are unified. As Ryman himself says: The wall becomes very much a part of the work, and so by blurring the difference between painting and wall, Ryman extends our consciousness of painting into an expanded, immersive, subtle, visual noise environment.

SKG: *Cordial thanks for the interview Dr. Nechvatal and all the best for your solo exhibition and for all your projects.*